

A 3

ATLANTIC COAST LINE WRECK

December 16, 1943
Lumberton, N. C.



Official Report
of Relief Operations

V
75
3
520

THE AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS
WASHINGTON, D. C.

ARC

STX
HE1780.5 575
A3
N8 A84 1520
1944

ARC 1520
March 1944

ATLANTIC COAST LINE WRECK

In the midst of the rolling countryside near Buie and Red Springs, North Carolina, on a long straight-away section of track, the southbound Atlantic Coast Line Tami-ami Champion encountered a broken rail which caused two of its rear coaches to be derailed and thrown across the adjoining track. The northbound twin of the flier, tearing along en route to New York, crowded with service personnel, vacationers returning from Miami, and businessmen, bore down through the wintry night and crashed directly into the derailed coaches of the southbound train.

The huge Diesel engine of the northbound train was ripped and torn on the front left side as it ploughed through the derailed cars, but managed to remain on the track. The worst part of the wreck was toward the rear, where five coaches leaped the track and folded together like an accordion, forming an inescapable trap for the mass of screaming passengers.

Rails and wooden ties were torn up like tin and matchsticks, and were strewn helter-skelter over the roadbed. The two cars in which the most people were killed were locked as though they had been welded that way, and the rear

one of the two coaches had hurtled up off the tracks into the car ahead and hit it so hard that the body of the coach was wrenched off the wheelbase. Cars had ploughed into the still soft ground and lay steaming in the 10-degree weather, in the midst of the blinding sleet.

The disaster was one of the worst of its kind in the history of the country, actually ranking third in number of persons killed. Each train carried a capacity load, at least two-thirds of whom were servicemen on Christmas furloughs. Of an estimated one thousand persons in the train it is nothing short of miraculous that only 72 were killed. One hundred and twenty-three were injured, of whom six were seriously injured and 73 required hospitalization.

The conductor of the northbound train attempted to get help, running the two or three miles to the nearest telephone to notify the Atlantic Coast Line office at Rocky Mount. Before he could reach the telephone, however, an appeal for help was sent by radio from a police car arriving at the scene of the wreck shortly after it occurred.

Centered as it was within a nine-mile radius of several small towns and near two army bases, the wreck was still a tortuous distance

by ambulance and auto for those trying to rush assistance to the victims over ice-covered highways.

Mobilization and Rescue

Through the combined efforts of the United States Army, doctors and nurses from nearby towns, first aiders and other volunteers from Red Cross chapters, state police, and uninjured passengers of both trains, a heroic piece of rescue work was carried out.

First word of the disaster to reach the Red Cross was received by the Robeson County Chapter, Lumberton, from the county coroner, about 2:30 a. m. In less than

half an hour a group of first aiders was mobilized and, accompanied by the chapter executive secretary, proceeded to the scene. About two hours later the secretary notified the Cumberland County Chapter at Fayetteville and the Red Cross field director at Laurinburg-Maxton Air Base. National headquarters and the Southeastern Area Office of the Red Cross were notified at the same time, as well as the field director at Fort Bragg.

Robeson County Chapter workers, first on the scene, report that, despite the horror, confusion, and bewilderment, early rescue work was carried on in an orderly manner. A navy captain, one of the



Official photograph, U. S. Army Air Forces

Coaches folded together like an accordion

uninjured passengers of the north-bound train, assumed charge of getting the injured out of the wreckage, using Pullman mattresses and blankets to make them as comfortable as possible. An army nurse just back from overseas, a passenger on a later train held up by the wreck, did heroic work in rescuing and caring for injured victims. Among their assistants were two young college girls, holders of Red Cross First Aid certificates, who helped many passengers in the first few hours after the wreck, making tourniquets from torn-up sheets from the Pullman berths, and carrying water from the train to the injured. These and others worked unceasingly in the bitter cold, until they were relieved by the arrival of volunteer doctors and nurses and other first aiders from nearby towns.

In addition to sending first aiders for the rescue work, the Robeson County Chapter furnished medical supplies, including plasma, sulfa drugs, dressings, and bandages. Other volunteer workers came from the Robeson County Chapter bringing trucks, cars, and other mobile equipment.

The coroner directed ambulances in the removal of the injured and the dead. The most seriously injured were taken to hospitals in Lumberton and Fayetteville. A few were taken by relief train to Florence, South Carolina. The dead were taken to a temporary morgue set up in Red Springs.

At 4:45 a. m., the Cumberland County Chapter went into action, mobilizing first aiders with blankets, splints, and dressings, and transporting them to the scene of the wreck. Nurses were rushed to the scene and nurse's aides to the nearby hospitals. Hot food was prepared and sent.

By 5:30 a. m., army personnel with equipment arrived from Laurinburg-Maxton Air Base and Fort Bragg and took charge of the rescue work. In addition to the regular medical units at Laurinburg-Maxton Air Base, two field hospital units were set up. The Army also sent machinery for lifting and clearing the wreckage, including mobile cranes and cutting equipment. An army field kitchen and crew reported to feed workers. The well-trained army crew carried out the rescue of the injured and removal of the dead so expertly that by 1 p. m., all those injured had been moved to hospitals. Removal of the dead continued through December 20, at which time it was definitely decided that all the dead had been found.

Red Cross field directors at Fort Bragg and Laurinburg - Maxton Air Base had rushed to the scene within a few hours after the crash, and the one from Fort Bragg was requested to assume charge of Red Cross work pending arrival of a disaster director from Southeastern Area Office. Assistant field directors from the two army posts were likewise pressed into service as well as the executive secretaries



Official photograph, U. S. Army Air Forces

Army crew directs removal of dead and injured

of Craven and Wake County Chapters. By 9 a. m., the assistant director of Disaster Service, a disaster representative, and a staff member of Public Information Service, all of the Southeastern Area at Atlanta, were on their way to Lumberton, already selected as the field headquarters. The state nursing consultant and two general field representatives were instructed to report and before noon the assistant director of disaster nursing at national headquarters was en route by plane.

Administration

Among the first administrative duties performed by the disaster

director upon his arrival were liaison contacts to clear on responsibilities. These clearances were made with the local chapter personnel, the Army, the Atlantic Coast Line officials, Red Cross field directors, the highway patrol, the funeral homes, local governmental officials, welfare departments, and public health officials.

After proper clearance with the Army and the railroad officials had been established through conferences, relief plans were completed and Red Cross personnel were assigned to various duties. A total of 13 paid Red Cross workers, in addition to local chapter personnel, took part in the administra-

tion of the relief operation. Their assignments were as follows:

Two Red Cross nurses were placed in charge of nursing and medical service. The field director from Fort Bragg and a disaster representative were assigned to the operations desk at Lumberton disaster headquarters. Their duties included the directing of the welfare inquiry services. An executive secretary was stationed at the Fayetteville office to aid with inquiries received there. Two Home Service workers from the Cumberland County Chapter assisted at the inquiry desk. A representative of Public Information Service from Southeastern Area was assigned to operate the press office. A general field representative was assigned to Red Springs, the center of the military activity and central clearance point for dead and injured. The field director from Laurinburg-Maxton Air Base was used as general contact person over the entire area. The two assistant field directors were attached to the headquarters office at Lumberton for special duty. A general field representative was assigned to the committee identifying the dead. The other executive secretaries were left free to help where needed.

Welfare Inquiry Service

Undoubtedly, the welfare inquiry service was the major job of the Red Cross in this disaster. When it is considered that approximately 1,000 persons were on the two

trains involved, the majority a long way from home, and that many passengers from other trains were delayed for hours due to the wreck, the enormous task of handling inquiries can be appreciated.

The Red Cross immediately set in motion an organization to secure information and to answer the more than 800 telegraph inquiries in addition to the numerous long distance calls pouring in from cities on the route from Florida to New York and in other parts of the nation. National headquarters and area offices of the Red Cross, as well as chapters throughout the country, aided in this service.

The two staff workers assigned, assisted by a staff of volunteers, set up card index files so that available information could be instantly found when inquiries came in. As far as possible, "standard word" telegrams were used to speed up the answers.

In addition to the office at the Lumberton headquarters an additional inquiry office was set up in Fayetteville for inquiries coming in to that city. A constant check-up was maintained between the two offices on all welfare inquiry information.

Identification of the Dead

Identification of the dead was a serious and difficult problem. Many of the bodies were badly mutilated. The Army aided considerably in this work, by marking and placing the personal effects and remains

together, securing a brief description, and assigning the bodies to various funeral homes. Our liaison staff member assigned to Red Springs secured all this information, as well as the names of dead and injured military personnel that might help in identifying individual cases. This information the Army released confidentially.

To facilitate the work, as full descriptions as could be maintained for each unidentified body were entered on cards. With these were compared descriptions sent in with inquiries. Then after all bodies had been moved to funeral homes, the identification committee, composed of the Home Service chairman of the local chapter and a general field representative, accompanied by a Red Cross nurse, inspected each body in an effort to discover similarities between descriptions from the two sources. The last body was identified on Tuesday, December 21. This committee, of course, worked closely with the welfare and inquiry group. Local nurses volunteered their services and helped substantially in aiding relatives and the Red Cross to identify the dead.

In connection with this work, the Red Cross aided in every way possible the relatives who visited the scene. Realizing the ordeal suffered by these people when viewing the remains of loved ones, Red Cross workers — usually a nurse and staff worker — accompanied all such visitors to the tem-

porary morgues. Relatives were met at the train and all their needs taken care of until they left.

Medical and Nursing Service

Emergency care at the scene of the wreck was given by volunteer doctors, nurses, and first aiders from nearby towns, and by passengers of the two trains. Upon the arrival of Red Cross staff nurses, organization was promptly effected for continuing service. After a conference with the Atlantic Coast Line officials, the Red Cross was asked to secure as many special nurses as were needed, the railroad agreeing to pay for their services as well as for all hospital costs. The two Red Cross staff nurses made frequent visits to the hospitals, placing 21 special nurses on duty. They also assisted in getting medicines, blood, and other needs for the injured.

Among the nurses used were 6 from Highsmith Hospital in Fayetteville, 2 from the Robeson County Welfare Service, and 7 nurse's aides from the Cumberland County Chapter. A total of 5 hospitals in the vicinity was used. As soon as possible military personnel were removed from these civilian hospitals to Fort Bragg and Laurinburg-Maxton Air Base. Plans were made for those patients needing prolonged medical care and hospitalization, and for follow-up visits by the Red Cross state nursing consultant.

A Typical Case

A good example of the type of service which the Red Cross gave in this disaster is shown in the following case. A young woman from New England was seriously hurt in the wreck, receiving among other injuries a severe blow at the base of the skull. Both her father and an uncle are well-known physicians, the latter a shock specialist. Her husband, an ensign in the Navy, appeared at Red Cross field headquarters shortly after the wreck. A field director and a nurse were assigned to the case.

At 3:00 a. m., the hospital to which the girl had been taken called field headquarters asking

for a supply of sodium amytal for hypodermic use. Nursing Service called the Red Cross field director at nearby Laurinburg-Maxton Air Base and the drug was rushed immediately by messenger. A blood transfusion was needed and volunteer donors were secured within a few minutes. The husband asked to have his wife's father brought down from New England, and shortly afterwards the attending physician requested that the woman's uncle be brought immediately. The Red Cross assisted in securing air transportation to Raleigh for both these men and the state highway patrol helped them to complete the journey.



Official photograph, U. S. Army Air Forces

Workers make final search of wreckage

The following day, attending doctors decided to call in a brain specialist from Durham as quickly as possible. Within twenty minutes from the time he received the call, this specialist was on his way in a state highway patrol car. Finally, the Red Cross provided an ambulance, attended by a nurse, to transport the young woman to a hospital in Durham, and a car for the doctors and the husband. Subsequent reports showed the patient had a good chance for recovery, despite the very serious injury, thanks to the prompt measures taken.

Summary

The success of this operation may be traced directly to the fine cooperation of all persons and organizations concerned. The working relationship between the Red Cross and the Atlantic Coast Line not

only aided in smooth operation, but undoubtedly will be of value as a guide in future disasters of this type.

The proximity of the two army posts and the prompt and thorough service they rendered proved invaluable. As in other disasters the Army and the Red Cross "teamed up" well. Aside from the service rendered of a direct military nature, the Army went out of its way to assist the Red Cross in its phase of the work.

The importance of a relief operation such as this cannot be measured in terms of financial cost. Relatively little cost was entailed by the Red Cross. As previously mentioned, expenses for hospital bills, medical care, special nurses, funeral and transportation of the dead, were all paid by the railroad company. In terms of service rendered the relief operation was of major importance.

**ADDRESS OF NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
AND
ADDRESSES AND JURISDICTIONS OF AREA OFFICES**

National Headquarters—*17th and D Streets, N. W., Washington 13, D. C.*

North Atlantic Area—*300 Fourth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.:* Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont.

Eastern Area—*615 North St. Asaph Street, Alexandria, Virginia:* District of Columbia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia.

Southeastern Area—*230 Spring Street, N. W., Atlanta 3, Georgia:* Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee.

Midwestern Area—*1709 Washington Avenue, St. Louis 3, Missouri:* Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

Pacific Area—*Civic Auditorium, Larkin and Grove Streets, San Francisco 1, California:* Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington.

Insular and Foreign Operations—*17th and D Streets, N. W., Washington 13, D. C.*

The Ohio State University



A.R.C. CIRCULAR
HV575A3

3 2435 020930731

001
NO1520